

CD REVIEW 88

SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony no 11 The Year 1905

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, Yevgeny Mravinsky.

Regis RRC1387 (60.22).

Recording first published in 1961.

What a magnificent symphony this is. I have known and loved it for over 50 years. And Mravinsky is the best conductor to perform it. There is no doubt that he is the finest Shostakovich conductor and all other conductors are put into the shade compared with his performances.

It was four days after the Moscow premiere that Mravinsky introduced it to Leningrad. It was an instant success. Its use of revolutionary songs helped endear it to the Soviets.

I often wonder whether political history is a good thing in music. Can such events be expressed in music satisfactorily? The rifle shots in the second movement may be apt.

It is subtitled The Year 1905 in which there was an uprising which eventually led to the formation of the Bolshevik movement. The first movement, Palace Square, refers to the protesters standing in the snow outside the Tsar's winter palace demanding reforms. They sang political songs but the mood was calm as shown in Shostakovich's opening movement in G minor. It is an extensive piece of still beauty with the undertones of a subdued menace from the timpani.

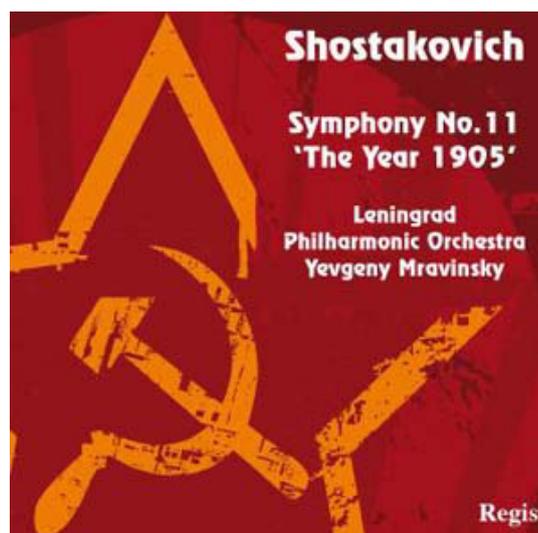
The second movement is called 9 January and depicts the Tsarist troops opening fire on the demonstrators which resulted in many deaths. This is followed by Eternal Memory which includes the funeral song You Fell a Victim which was sung at Lenin's funeral. The finale is a heroic and, perhaps, a sardonic march indicating the victory of 1917 when the Tsar system was abolished and Lenin took charge.

To some extent Shostakovich was apparently approving of the Bolshevik revolution. Later, he could also have become a fatality with his controversial Symphony no 4 since he could have been arrested and executed. He responded with his Symphony no 5 headed 'a composer's reaction to just criticism'. Was he sincere in this statement or just digging himself out of a political hole?

It cannot be right when authorities set down rules for composers such as the Russian composers having to comply with Stalin's regime and dictates. All music had to comply with Soviet guidelines. Music could not be 'modern' and had always to be nationalistic.

Some have suggested that this symphony, in some way, has to do with the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and if that is so it might imply that Shostakovich did not approve of communism. Most of his eleventh symphony was written before this uprising. That Mravinsky had this uprising in Budapest in mind when he conducted the work is also speculation.

Rostropovich's performance is too long adding eight minutes to the work. Andrew Litton keeps to the right tempi. Stokowski with the Houston Orchestra is a stokowskied performance. Gergiev has a good sound but his percussion players overwhelmingly take over in the second movement. Petrenko on Naxos has been warmly received by some but he misses the mark.



The sound on this CD is slightly on the old side and occasionally a little shrill but it is the performance to have. There are no excesses or histrionics but a commitment and devotion to this fine score. To say more would only be a list of superlatives.

The other consideration is that I have followed this performance and the performance of others with the score and it is Mravinsky that is the most faithful and accurate. And only the poorly informed will disagree.

It is a fact that Mravinsky with any Shostakovich symphony will be superior to all others. Of special note, I marvel at his performance of the Symphony no 8, probably the most profound piece Shostakovich ever wrote.

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